




ALBERTA
EDUCATION

*Office of the Minister
MLA, Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater*

February 20, 2013

Ms. Carol Henderson
President
Alberta Teachers' Association
11010 – 142 Street
Edmonton, AB T5N 2R1

Ms. Jacquie Hansen
Board Chair
Alberta School Board Association
1200, 9925 – 109 Street
Edmonton, AB T5K 2J8


Dear Ms. Henderson and Ms. Hansen,

Over the last two and a half years, our organizations have spent countless hours negotiating a province-wide agreement for our teachers. While the process has been challenging at times, it has also been an opportunity for us to discuss some very important issues and work together to resolve them. However, these talks have taken significant time and money and are poised to consume our education system if we don't move to action.

I have been encouraged by the recent discussions I have had with each of you and your willingness to reconsider a provincial approach to these negotiations. I have also been encouraged by your willingness to consider a new government offer that reflects our recent discussions, and offers teachers, parents and students an opportunity for stability in these challenging financial times.

As you will recall from our last offer, there are far more areas where we agree than where we disagree. We agree that teachers are facing unprecedented diversity in their classrooms. We agree that to reach the vision outlined in Inspiring Education, teachers need more support than ever before to truly transform our system and maintain our leadership role in education. And we agree that we need to do all we can to preserve our investment in education and in our kids.

Make no mistake, as a province we face significant financial challenges. But we also face amazing opportunities in education. We have one of the best systems in the world, and we are on the road to making it even better. Over the last decade, we have increased funding for education by 62 per cent and we provide more per child towards education than any other province in the country.



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Government is doing everything possible to maintain that investment, but it is clear that - as with other sectors of the public service - only a long-term labour agreement will offer the security and stability our education workforce desires. I don't want teachers facing the inevitable discussions of salary roll-backs. I want teachers focused on improving the educational opportunities for kids. I know you want that too.

This new proposal addresses those areas where we previously disagreed in a balanced way. I truly believe it will satisfy the interests of all parties. More importantly, this proposal is fair for teachers, school boards and is in the best interest of our children. Simply put, it is time to put the focus back on students and off the ongoing labour negotiations.

Maintaining fair compensation

In that spirit, I am prepared to accept the salary terms we agreed to previously. However, in light of our financial outlook we have been forced to adjust the structure of the compensation offer slightly. Both your organizations have said all through these negotiations that your interest is not money, and you acknowledge that teachers are well compensated. The limited dollars available must go to the classroom, to maintain the important work we have been doing to address class sizes and support students and their unique learning needs.

I am proposing a four year Agreement with a salary freeze for the first three years, followed by a 2 per cent increase in the fourth year funded by Government. However, in an effort to expedite an Agreement with teachers that is reasonable, Government will work with school boards to provide a cash incentive to teachers equivalent to one per cent of their salary in the third and fourth years if we can reach a provincial deal by the end of February.

In addition, in the third year of the Agreement Government will narrow the salary gap in any collective agreements where, after the top five school jurisdictions have been removed from the calculation, salaries are below the provincial average. This will bring greater equity to the compensation of our teachers and ensure teachers are not disadvantaged based on geography.

Government will fully fund the increases in the fourth year, along with the salary grid changes. However, I look to boards to fund the incentive in the third year and to provide equivalent maximum of half a per cent of their 2012-13 Base Instruction Grant to fund any other locally negotiated enhancements over the term of the Agreement.

I recognize that even these modest increases will be challenging for school boards to manage during a time of significant fiscal restraint. However, we have benefitted from the most generous funding in the country for education, and our boards have operating surpluses in place to help address cost pressures.

In recognition of school boards agreeing to the terms of this contract, Government will commit that there will be no repatriation of any accumulated surpluses over the term of the Agreement.

Addressing workload challenges

Throughout our negotiations it has been clear the most significant issue facing teachers in Alberta is workload. The changing role of a teacher, the diversity on our classrooms, the pace of technology are all impacting the time teachers have to prepare and collaborate. It has also impacted the time teachers have to learn and grow as professionals.

School boards, particularly those representing rural schools, have also been clear that there is no one size fits all way to solve this challenge. We can't risk the viability of small rural schools to reach a labor agreement. That is simply not in the best interest of our kids.

I have heard you both, and I believe I have proposed a reasonable approach that will allow us to address both concerns. This Agreement would require those school jurisdictions without teacher instructional or assignable time limitations in their collective agreements today to endeavor to reduce annual instructional hours over the course of this Agreement.

The goal for all boards will be an annual average of 907 hours per year of instructional time. This represents the time individual teachers spend in the classroom, not the instructional time for individual students. Government is not willing to consider reducing the hours students spend learning to get a labour Agreement.

By limiting the time teachers are in the classroom, they will have more time to prepare and collaborate, to participate in other aspects of the school and to gain critical professional development required to enhance skills. We feel this approach is more flexible than limiting assignable time and is more achievable for smaller boards.

However, there will be some schools across the province that will simply not be able to meet this goal. While many think the days of the one room school house are behind us, small schools with very limited teaching staff are still a reality in some rural communities. Those schools are unique, and this Agreement offers an automatic exemption for the duration of the Agreement to our smallest schools.

Other schools will also likely struggle to meet this new instructional threshold and we accept the ATA proposal for an Exceptions Committee to help transition these schools towards the goal. School boards who cannot meet the threshold immediately will be expected to report to the Exceptions Committee on their progress and will be expected to show progress towards the goal by the end of the Agreement.

In addition to reducing instructional time requirements, we maintain the other areas of our previous offer to study and address workload over the long-term, including the establishment of a Teacher Development and Practice Committee, and a comprehensive study of teacher workload across the province.

Working together for solutions

At this time, we are also prepared to accept the ATA proposal for membership of the Teacher Development Committee. The Committee will play a vital role in providing recommendations on everything from the role of the teacher in the 21st century to long term strategies to address workload. The committee will include both the ATA President and Executive Secretary and ATA will appoint the Chair.

In closing, I want to thank each of you for taking the time to consider this offer. While I respect that local bargaining is ongoing, I felt it was imperative to keep trying to achieve a long-term agreement that will ensure our teachers remain the best paid of the provinces and prevent the possibility of salary roll-backs. I also want to minimize as much as possible reductions in teaching staff. We have the best teachers in the world in our classrooms, and I want to keep them there.

The incentives in this offer come with the hope you will move quickly. I must stress these incentives – both financial and the membership of the Exceptions Committee - will not be carried over if we need to reach a deal after the provincial budget is tabled. I respect and understand local boards will need to negotiate in other areas not covered by this offer as they see fit based on the budget restraints we are all facing.

I ask that you both accept this offer in the spirit in which it is presented and take it forward to your members. If you would like me to meet with your leadership teams to discuss the offer fully, I am happy to that at your convenience.

We are the best in the world, and we owe it to our children to do everything we can to keep it that way. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Jeff Johnson
Minister
MLA, Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater

cc: Honourable Alison Redford, Q.C.
Premier